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om downsizes Delta tunnels plan, from two to - Sacramento Bee, The (CA) - May 3, 2019 - page 1A

May 3, 2019 | Sacramento Bee, The (CA) | Dale Kasler and Ryan Sabalow | Page 1A

Gov. Gavin Newsom's administration officially pulled the plug Thursday on the twin Delta tunnels, fullfilling Newsom's pledge to downsize the project to a single pipe as he attempts to chart a new course for California's troubled water-delivery system.

The Department of Water Resources halted the planning on the twin tunnels by withdrawing its application to a sister agency, the State Water Resources Control Board, for permission to build the massive project from a starting point on the Sacramento River near Courtland. The state also scrapped documents declaring that the twin tunnels plan - designed to smooth water deliveries to the southern half of the state - complied with California's environmental laws.

In the short run, the decision means more delays for a project that's been on the drawing board for more than a decade. Karla Nemeth, director of the Department of Water Resources, said it could take up to three years to rework the environmental documents and other permits needed to build a single tunnel beneath the Delta. But by downsizing and simplifying the project, she said the state hopes it can speed up the "overall delivery schedule" for the project.

Nemeth said the federal Bureau of Reclamation, the state's partner in the Delta project, is also withdrawing its applications and environmental permits.

Officials said they will soon file a new application, as well as new environmental reviews, to support their plan for a single tunnel.

Downsizing the project is in line with Newsom's effort to push a more centrist approach on water issues than his predecessor, Jerry Brown, who once told tunnels opponents to "shut up." Earlier this week Newsom signed an executive order directing Natural Resources and other agencies to develop a comprehensive "water resilience portfolio" in an effort to unite warring factions like environmentalists and farmers.

Besides costing billions of dollars less than the original, Nemeth said a downsized project could be "more responsive to the naysayers" who believe WaterFix, as it's officially known, will harm the Delta instead of helping it. A single tunnel will bring fewer environmental impacts to the Delta, and "that's a good place to be," she said.

Shortly after the announcement, the Natural Resources Defense Council, one of the environmental groups suing to block the project, said a single tunnel "that takes less water from the Delta" is worth considering.

But Nemeth acknowledged, "I don't expect that all parties will be supportive," and some critics remain skeptical of the smaller proposal.

Dante Nomellini, a Stockton attorney who represents the Central Delta Water Agency, said farmers and others he represents still oppose a single tunnel. Even a downsized project could be used to send copious amounts of Northern California water to powerful south state interests, bringing more harm to the estuary, he said.

"And the disruption to our area for 10 or 15 years with tunnel construction going right through the middle of important habitat in the Delta, it's just terrible for us," Nomellini said.

Downsizing would save about $5 billion, bringing project costs down to around $11 billion. South state water agencies that rely on shipments from the Delta will foot the bill.

Jeff Kightlinger of the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California - which was one of the key backers for the original twin tunnels proposal and has pledged to contribute billions to the project - endorsed Newsom's decision.

"We will work with the administration to expeditiously advance a project that is long overdue to both meet the water reliability needs of the state and minimize impacts to the communities and ecology of the Delta," he said in a prepared statement.

The Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta is the hub of the state's water network. Giant pumps at the south end of the estuary, near Tracy, deliver supplies from Northern California to irrigation districts and municipalities that belong to the State Water Project and the federal Central Valley Project. Around 25 million Southern Californians and Bay Area residents receive imported water from the Delta. The pumps supply water to 3 million acres of farmland.

Scientists say decades of pumping is a key reason for the decline in the Delta's ecosystem and its imperiled fish species, including the critically endangered Delta smelt and winter-run Chinook salmon.

The pumps are so strong that they sometimes reverse river flows within the Delta and push migrating fish toward predators or the pumps themselves. As a result, often the pumps have to be throttled back, allowing the river water to follow its natural course to the ocean - to the frustration of the south state water agencies counting on the deliveries.

The Delta project - one tunnel or two - has been touted as a way of correcting the problem. By routing a portion of the Sacramento River's flow underground and delivering it directly to the pumps, the state's engineers say the "reverse flow" issue would be eased, enabling the pumps to operate more reliably while doing less harm to the fish.

The original twin tunnels proposal has been enormously controversial, though.

Environmentalists, salmon fishing groups and Delta farmers said the project, by diverting a portion of the Sacramento River, would harm native fish and leave the estuary too salty for agriculture; they also branded it a south-state "water grab."

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